"An Age Fated to Vanish"

"An age fated to vanish": Vera Stein Erlich's Anthropological Records of Interwar Yugoslavia[1]

By Chiara Bonfiglioli

The English preface to the collection *Family in Transition. A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages* (Princeton 1966), previously published in (Serbo-)Croatian as *Porodica u Transformaciji* (Zagreb, 1964), is an epic tale of human resistance and solidarity in uncertain and dangerous times. The book *Family in Transition*, in fact, came into being not as an ordinary piece of academic research, but as an extraordinary collective project, started on the eve of the invasion, occupation and division of Yugoslavia by the Axis powers.

In the late 1930s the Yugoslav-Jewish anthropologist and psychologist Vera Stein Erlich (1897-1980) was conducting pioneering research on critical pedagogy. She was particularly interested in non-authoritarian teaching in public schools, and in 1934 had published a book on the Montessori Method. In her hometown of Zagreb, she was active among progressive schoolteachers struggling for social reform and the improvement of living standards in rural areas.[2] At that time, she had already published a number of essays dealing with progressive education, women's emancipation, and women's position in the Jewish community.[3] However, when in 1937 Erlich was invited by some Muslim male students to study Muslim family life in order to "struggle for the emancipation of the Muslim woman", she responded only reluctantly. In spite of her previous work as a social reformer, Erlich was "not very enthusiastic about attacking the women's veil or the lattice window", as she recalled later. At that time, she was instead more interested, as an anthropologist, in studying the patriarchal family model in practice. Thus, she drew up a detailed questionnaire on Muslim family life in Bosnia for the purposes of such a study. Over the summer, this project expanded as it intersected with her other activity of lecturing on psychology to teachers from all parts of Yugoslavia. When her students heard about her plan to study Bosnian families, they asked for a more thorough approach that would cover other parts of the country, too. "In their own Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, [they claimed] there still existed bride purchase, bride abduction" which also called for further anthropological study.[4]

In the Kingdom of Yugoslavia at that time, patriarchal family customs were characteristic not only of Muslim households, but were a common feature of peasant life in general. In this predominantly rural country, the *zadrugas*[5], or collective family households in which the male descendants remained in the common home and in which "rank was determined by age and sex", had been the founding unit of social life for centuries. Vera Stein Erlich thus designed an anthropological survey that allowed her to investigate how family customs and norms varied among different regions and among the country's different religious groups. The survey was then sent to hundreds of villages, and was "painstakingly filled in" by teachers and doctors, who became the most enthusiastic of research assistants and oral historians. Soon Vera Stein Erlich had access to an immense amount of research material in the form of 305 surveys suitable to comparative study. But, as she recalled later, it seemed that the threat of war inched closer every day and there was only little time left. In her preface to the 1966 publication of this research, she explained that she had felt at the time as though she were the protagonist of the Grimm fairy tale of the six swans. In the fairy tale, a girl must knit shirts ever more quickly in order to save her brothers from a spell.

When World War II reached Yugoslavia, Erlich miraculously managed to survive, although her husband, the psychologist Benno Stein, was murdered in the Jasenovac concentration camp set up by the so-called Independent State of Croatia, an Italian-German condominium. In her flight through occupied Yugoslavia, Erlich managed to carry the suitcase containing the surveys with her all the way from Nazi-occupied Zagreb to Dalmatia, then under Italian occupation, and further on through the mountains of Karst to the island of Vis, where the headquarters of Tito's partisan army were located. She hid the suitcase in a cellar in Vis and managed to reach southern Italy, which was already under Allied control. Later, the suitcase was delivered to her in Bari by an UNRRA social worker from Canada.

In southern Italy, Vera Stein Erlich also worked as an UNRRA social worker. While dealing with Yugoslav refugees, she kept collecting material on their pre-war family life, comparing their accounts with the surveys she had already gathered. In 1951, she moved to the United States, where she received a doctorate in anthropology and worked as a lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley. Her experience working at an American university was crucial to developing a transnational, comparative approach in her anthropological work[6], as is evident in her frequent cross-cultural comparisons between contexts as different as Yugoslavia, Western Europe, the United States and Latin America.

When she returned to live in Zagreb in the early 1960s, Vera Stein Erlich once again took up her research on family life in interwar Yugoslavia. The main challenge was to organize a vast amount of heterogeneous material, and to account for the variety of geographical regions and modes of life existing

in a country that carried the multiple legacies of both Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman domination – a task that Erlich managed while aptly describing the historical moment in which the traditional patriarchal Balkan society and family started to disintegrate, under the influx of monetary economy.[7] While "old style" patriarchal family relations were present in the territories that had seen longer domination by the Ottoman Empire, "modern" family relations were already emerging in the regions affected by market economy and Westernization. It was in these regions in particular that "patriarchal modes of life were destroyed under the influence of economic and political changes."[8] Against this empirical background, Erlich constructed a framework in which different spaces corresponded to different stages of development. In this vein, she argued that "[e]ach region set off the past of the other. In many districts millennial customs and standards seemed to have remained unchanged, whereas in others they had come to resemble those of the Western European environment. The old Slav customs and standards of relationships were also apparently transformed to varying degrees in the various regions. The temporal succession was, as it were, shown on a background screen of spatial distribution."[9]

While observing that the Ottoman legacy had a conservative effect on social relations, including family ones, the distinction between "old style" and "modern" areas was in no way hierarchical or judgmental, and, interestingly, carried neither an Orientalist evaluation of the Ottoman presence in the region nor any affirmation of Western cultural superiority. The anthropologist, in fact, attempted to explain the persistence of and change to certain family customs in various regions by relating them much more to the influence of imperial legacies, wars and sudden economic changes than to cultural or religious differences. The diversity of family patterns in a small given area, independent of religious variations, is something that has also been noted recently by Maria Todorova, who also underlines the importance of geographical and economic constraints over religious factors in the diffusion of the zadruga in Ottoman Bulgaria.[10] The specificity of the different regions and of their peculiar mix of historical and cultural legacies was already apparent in the writing style of her informants: "The regional life styles are such rounded entities and so distinct that frequently one sentence reveals the whole system."[11] Religious differences were nonetheless assessed together with regional differences, by taking the different villages as statistical units, and by showing how each custom applied differently in Macedonian Albanian villages, Macedonian Christian villages, Bosnian Moslem villages, Bosnian Christian villages, Serbian villages, Croatian villages, and the villages of the Adriatic coast.[12]

Erlich alternates her analysis with the voices and anecdotes of her anonymous village informants, painting a veritable fresco of rural life in interwar Yugoslavia. After having provided a historical background of the different regions of Yugoslavia, the chapters of the book address the following social relations in the different districts: the preservation and the break-up of the zadruga, the status of the father and his authority over the children, the relationship between mother and daughter-in-law, the relationship between brother and sister and between boys and girls, marriage customs (selection of spouses, bride abduction, dowry, marriage age), the relationship between husband and wife (authority of the husband, "rebellion and resignation to woman's lot"), childbearing customs and attitudes towards birth control, extramarital relationships, and the influence of illiteracy over family relations. Vera Stein Erlich's results offer a multi-layered perspective on family relations and women's status within the family. She counterposes the traditional patriarchal family of the former Ottoman provinces to the "families in transition," or families with a high degree of conflict between husband and wife and between parents and children. In these more conflictual families of Serbia and Croatia, the patriarchal zadruga and what she defines as the "old order" are breaking up under the pressure of the new market economy. In fact, the so called money economy had brought the "knowledge of greater individual freedom" among young people and women, and thus also a greater degree of opposition to societal and family norms. Interestingly, Erlich found out that violence within the family was not typical of the traditional patriarchal model, in which the authority of the father and the husband was highly respected and unchallenged. It was, rather, typical of the regions "in transition," such as Serbia and Croatia, in which economic and social transformations brought more individualism, and thus also more resistance against traditional patriarchal authority. The advance of a globalised monetary economy brought conflict among different generations and between husbands and wives, who fought over the division of property and labour. In many villages the peasants were extremely impoverished and still suffered from the consequences of the Great Depression. In these regions "the stormy transformation of the economy had a parallel course with discord in the family."[13] All in all, the transition to "modern" family relations was, therefore, not immediately emancipatory for women and children.[14]

The shift from collective to individual farming placed a heavy burden on peasant women, who could no longer count on the help of other female members of the family. The disruption of community relations and collective family life, while allowing for more freedom, placed the "weaker" members of the community (women, children, the elderly) in a situation of vulnerability and uncertainty. In the patriarchal family, in fact, the sexual freedom of young women (and of young men) was very limited. In the transitional "stage of stormy ferment," girls' individual liberty increased, but they were also exposed to men's self-interest, and could be rejected by the community or be unable to marry when pregnant. In the stage that Erlich calls a "new equilibrium," which she saw in the coastal areas, girls enjoyed greater freedoms and more protection than in the stage of transformation (for instance, they could have premarital relationships with their fiancé or marry when pregnant).[15]

The unequal socialization of male and female children, and of systemic male violence against women and children, are recurrent themes in the book. While most of the village informants were men, women's voices were nonetheless incorporated into the surveys. The story of Vuka, for instance – a peasant woman who was passionate about learning, but unable to continue school, and married by force to an abusive man – was collected by a female teacher from Serbia. According to the latter, Vuka placed high hopes in education, and asked the teacher to help her female child by "teaching her the right things," namely "not to be a martyr as I was." By asking her child's teacher for help, Vuka wanted to make sure that her daughter's fate would not match her own.[16]

In the rural areas of the old Yugoslavia, female illiteracy, infant mortality and maternal deaths were among the highest in Europe. From 1944 onwards, the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia (AFŽ) organized massive campaigns of alphabetization and sanitation in the villages of the republics, and illiteracy and mortality rates began to drop – an effect due also to economic development. Even in the socialist era, however, the important differences in life standards that existed between the most and the least developed regions could never be bridged completely. Already during the interwar period, standards of living were higher in the Adriatic region, which had already passed the phase of economic transition. Here family relations seemed to have reached the more harmonious balance of Erlich's "new equilibrium." Thanks to the resources offered by productive agriculture and male labour emigration overseas, women gained greater decision-making power in everyday life, and relationships between spouses acquired a more equal character. Although married women were treated better by their husbands, however, many women in the Adriatic coast and in the islands never married, as a "surplus of women" due to emigration and the First World War existed. The author thus observed that it was difficult to judge whether "life in the modern environment" was more favourable to a woman than "life in the patriarchal environment."[17]

In her work, Erlich was interested in the quality of interpersonal relations, including love relations. She studied the dynamic interplay of economic and cultural factors shaping the subjective and intersubjective life of her informants, and looked at the way in which the different cultural legacies present in the region influenced the field of love and family relations. Challenging the idea that "romantic love" was an artificial invention brought by Hollywood, Vera Stein Erlich investigated love relations among illiterate Yugoslav peasants, adopting a universalistic, humanist stance on love relations that acknowledged not only men's, but also women's, sexual desires.[18]

In the previously Ottoman parts of Yugoslavia, the anthropologist found a strong tendency towards romantic love, a result that challenges the stereotype according to which romantic love was a Western European phenomenon.[19] She noted this influence in other countries which had historical contact with Moorish culture, including Sicily, Spain, and Latin America. In a fascinating passage of the book, Erlich wrote that "[i]n patriarchal regions under Turkish influence, as in Bosnia and Macedonia, the soil for the development of love was much more favorable. […]. The importance of beauty, or merak, and enjoyment in the individual sense, taken together with the Oriental tradition were favorable to love […]. This is not only to be seen in Yugoslav areas but also in many other countries. […]. Anyone who has opportunity for comparison will have noted the ineffaceable Near-Eastern element in the countryside near Sarajevo as well as in Sicilian or Mexican towns and villages."[20]

While describing how the Ottoman heritage was conducive to love feelings, Vera Stein Erlich also observed that the Turkish domination had brought a fatalistic attitude which prevented the concrete realization of love relationships in everyday life. In the region of Slavonia, the fatalism connected to the Ottoman heritage was "tempered" by the successive 150 years of Habsburg domination, which brought a "relativistic" and "rational" outlook. The economic stability of this region, moreover, favoured "a disposition for love devoid of heavy melancholy."[21]

In *Family in Transition*, Vera Stein Erlich offers a masterful description of a region characterized by the coexistence of multiple cultural heritages. The author resists cultural determinism and underlines instead the importance of human agency in the midst of dynamic cross-cultural exchanges. In a chapter named "The Riddle of Culture contact," she describes the ways in which different life styles emerged in the Balkans as an encounter between the Western and the Ottoman legacy. The metaphor of the mosaic, traditionally used to describe the coexistence of different religions and traditions in the Yugoslav region, is put into question in this passage: "Every culture contact generates something new, a whole which is different and more than the sum of its components. This is true even if the components seem to counteract each other, for discord, too, can be a common characteristic. […] The analogy of a chemical compound seems to me more valid for culture contact than the analogy of a mosaic which is so often used. For in creating a mosaic the result can be partly foreseen if the pieces are known, since new qualities will not appear. With chemical compounds, however, new qualities may appear, which cannot be foreseen. […] Only in retrospect it is possible to know which factors were decisive in bringing individuals or groups to resistance, resignation or collaboration."[22]

This passage illustrating the "riddle of culture contact" in the form of a chemical compound is a good example of Erlich's open and reflexive method, and of her pioneering intuitions. With her passion for historical detail, her careful montage of the informants' voices and her focus on individual agency in a time of collective historical transformations, the anthropologist manages to provide an important mapping of everyday family life in interwar Yugoslavia. *Family in Transition*, moreover, provides a significant account of gender relations and women's lives in times of historical transition. Her observations about the correlation between the militarization of society and violence within the family anticipate contemporary feminist studies dealing with the impact of violent conflict and militarization on gender relations. Throughout her work, Erlich dealt with the correlation between authoritarianism in the family and authoritarianism in society.[23] Her analysis of increased possibilities and increased risks for women dealing with economies in transition could be easily transposed to women's contemporary condition in the global South.

Family in Transition was Vera Stein Erlich's life-long project, covering a time span of almost thirty years. Between the beginning of the research in 1937 and the publication of the book in 1964, and its English edition in 1966, the region of Yugoslavia had been left in ruins by foreign occupation and civil war during World War II. After the war, and with the socialist revolution, what used to be a mainly peasant country underwent a rapid process of reconstruction, urbanization and industrialization. In 1951, Erlich left Yugoslavia, but she returned to Zagreb in 1961 and taught social anthropology in the Philosophy Faculty there until her death in 1980. The preface, epilogue and acknowledgments included in *Family in Transition* are constructed as memory pieces, recounting the extraordinary story of her research project which also forms a significant part of Erlich's own life story. Particularly moving is the epilogue to the book, in which the author draws connections among the disruption of family life during World War II, and of the wish to marry and recreate families that she observed among young survivors of concentration camps, whom she met during her work with UNRRA in postwar Italy. In her preface to the book, Erlich paid a touching homage to her numerous collaborators, many of whom had died during the war in resistance fighting. A survivor herself, Vera Stein Erlich dedicated *Family in Transition* to all the people who had helped her in collecting the records of "the age in which we had lived, an age fated to vanish."

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[1] Essay relates to source: Vera Stein Erlich: Story of a Survey (1966).

[2] Supek, Olga, Vera Stein Erlich (1897-1980), in: Current Anthropology 22/2 (April 1981), pp. 196-197.

[3] Sklevicky, Lydia, Ispred mogucnosti recepcije: Vera Stein Erlich, in: Konji, Zene, Ratovi, Zagreb, Druga 1996, p. 255.

[4] Erlich, Vera Stein, Story of a Survey, preface, in: Family in Transition. A Study of 300 Yugoslav Villages, Princeton 1966 p. v-xi, p. v. In the following, all the citations of the source are part of the text published along with the essay, if not mentioned otherwise.

[5] The "zadruga" is defined by Erlich as the "extended family" which became the unit of subsistence economy, based on the principle of patrilinear descendance, as well as on hierarchical rank defined by sex and age (Erlich, Family in Transition, p. 32). Todorova analyses the word zadruga as a nineteenth century neologism, which assumed different meanings over time, and which came to signify the difference between the West European ideal type of the family and the Balkan family type. For a critical discussion of the historic European family pattern and of the romanticized image of the zadruga within these debates, see Todorova, Maria, Balkan Family Structure and the European Pattern. Demographic Developments in Ottoman Bulgaria, Budapest 2006, pp. 199-210.

[6] Supek, Vera Stein Erlich.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Erlich, Family in Transition, p. 28.

[9] Ibid., p. 27.

[10] Todorova, Balkan Family Structure, pp. 31, 166.

[11] Erlich, Family in Transition, p. 358.

[12] Ibid., p. 29.

[13] Ibid., p. 449.

[14] See also Sklevicky, Ispred mogucnosti recepcije, p. 254.

[15] Erlich, Family in Transition, p. 155.

[16] Ibid., p. 248.

[17] Ibid., p. 286.

[18] See Erlich, Vera Stein, Love Sentiments and Love Relations in Rural Yugoslavia, in: Anthropologica, 12/1 (1970), pp. 23-44.

[19]Passerini, Luisa, Europe in Love, Love in Europe: Imagination and Politics between the Wars, New York 1999.

[20] Erlich, Family in Transition, p. 342.

[21] Ibid., p. 344.

[22] Ibid., p. 396-397.

[23] Sklevicky, Ispred mogucnosti recepcije.

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